



Honor is as honor does

Commentary by Staff Sgt. Glenn Coe

***“Character is what you
are in the dark.”***

— D. L. Moody

It was dark that winter evening as I drove down Fort Monroe’s Fenwick Road. Suddenly, the vehicle in front of me stopped by the curb, letting out a Marine. Even in the dark, he was easily recognizable in Dress Blues, including the white belt and white cap.

As he approached the front step of what I presumed was his residence, he raised his right arm and rendered a crisp hand salute. I looked to see if there was someone else there. He was alone, except for the colors of the United States of America proudly waving on the porch. It struck me how many uniformed personnel duck indoors to avoid the sounding of “Retreat,” or the ones that drive through it, pretending not to hear the distinct bugle call.

If a thing is expedient, which usually means someone may be watching, then we do it. On the night mentioned, it was dark, the Marine’s ride had pulled away and no one would have been the wiser if he had decided that he was “off-duty.” Honor is as honor does. His act, simple and automatic, spoke volumes about his character, and took my mind to larger ramifications of the words “character” and “honor.”

A few months ago, I heard Chaplain (Lt. Col.) David Reese, the Fort Monroe [Va.] post chaplain, quote D.L. Moody as saying, “Character is what you are in the dark.” It’s what you do when no one sees you and when there is little chance of being discovered. The nature of those secret deeds is something that defines our character. A person’s visible life eventually manifests those priorities, which resonate in the silent chambers of one’s soul. Free are those who have successfully calibrated their acts and deeds with their values. A daunting task to say the least, but one worthy of our best efforts.

These pillars of principle – character and honor – have become cliché military catch phrases, but I feel that their relevance endures because of the enormous impact they have in the course of events. I saw them personified in deed on March 23, 1994. Unlike the Marine whose act of honor was cloaked under the veil of darkness, these were manifest in the bright daylight of a beautiful North Carolina spring afternoon.

As a Jumpmaster student at Pope Air Force Base's "Green Ramp," I remember hearing what sounded like a fighter jet's afterburner igniting. In actuality, an Air Force F-16 fighter and a C-130 cargo plane had "bumped" in mid-air. The pilots ejected, sending the F16 – now a massive fireball after ricocheting off of a parked plane – careening through scores of paratroopers massed for an airborne operation.

The scene was surreal. Victims, crushed and burned, lay scattered across the tarmac amid burning vehicles. The booms of secondary explosions muffled all other noises. The first to respond were mostly fellow students at the Jumpmaster School, some of whom were trained Combat Lifesavers. The training they received never prepared them for the medical emergencies they now faced.

We did what we could; just like Maj. Larry Perino and his fellow Rangers had with the downed Blackhawks nearly six months prior in Mogadishu, Somalia.

I watched a soldier extinguish flames on a burning soldier with nothing but his bare hands. I saw another frantically attempting CPR to save a convulsing soldier. Senior Jumpmaster Instructor Sgt. 1st Class Daniel Bennett cleared out the classroom to set up a burn and triage site. Staff Sgt. Daniel Price epitomized the warrior ethos when he threw himself over Spc. Estella Wingfield, shielding her from the blast. She survived, but Price, a husband and father of five, gave his life for the principles that propelled him.

Without regard for personal safety, soldiers were responding to the warrior code that had been instilled in them since their inception into the Army. These patriots reacted to the crisis, just as we all witnessed firemen, police and ordinary citizens doing on Sept. 11, 2001. Herein was the relevance of words that flow so freely from our lips, words like character, honor, moral courage and selfless service.

Twenty-four paratroopers perished as a result of that incident, March 23, 1994; 100 more were injured. However, the



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core values of our Army and nation, born of small and seemingly insignificant acts of character and honor, emerged "refreshed by the blood of martyrs" and heroes.

(Editor's note: Staff Sgt. Glenn Coe is the NCOIC, Fort Monroe, Va., Post Chaplain's Office.)